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ABSTRACT

In an examination of effective presentation and practice of English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) instruction, this paper focuses on the ways that teachers can use examples as instructional techniques. The purpose of the paper is to clarify both the process of exemplification and its agent, examples, as they are used in ESL teaching and especially as they appear in published teaching materials. The following questions are addressed: (1) What is exemplification and what is an example? (2) How are examples used in professionally published ESL/English as a Foreign Language teaching materials? (3) How do ESL students use examples from their textbooks and in their language learning? and (4) What is a good example? It is concluded that while good examples are powerful tools for language teachers and language learners, the complexity of effective exemplification means that most teachers and materials writers will need much time and practice to learn to create good examples. Further thought must be given to how ESL teachers can best use examples, how language learners use examples as part of their battery of learning skills, and how the process of exemplification can be used as a basic strategy both in communication and in second language acquisition. Contains 24 references. (LB)

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Exemplification and the Example

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The project reported in this paper began with a decision to take another look at a term that is familiar to all language teachers and students: the example. Our purpose was to clarify both the process of exemplification and its agent the example as they are used in the teaching of ESL, especially as they appear in published teaching materials. Examples are such a basic part of language teaching and learning that they seem to have been taken for granted by teachers and scholars in our field. In contrast to other issues, very little has been written about the design and development of ESL materials and how examples have been used in them. What has been published about materials focuses on activities that teachers can use to supplement or perhaps replace published textbooks (Ur 1988), on evaluation of materials in the textbook-selection process (Skierso 1991), or on the relation between materials and curriculum or syllabi (Dubin and Olshtain 1986). Other than the discussions by Sweet (originally published in 1899 but quoted here from the 1964 edition) and Moon (1990), we could find no other work focused on the characteristics of examples and their use by second language teachers and language learners. Much of the information about examples that is available comes from studies in literary criticism (Serridge 1980), the teaching of academic subjects (Grow 1987, Haack 1972), instructional design (McCallum, Apking, and Snyder 1987; Yelon and Massa 1987), computer science (Berwick 1986), and psychology (Pirolli 1985).

In this project, we addressed the following questions: (1) What is exemplification and what is an example? That is, how are the basic terms defined? (2) How are examples used in professionally published ESL/EFL teaching materials? (3) How do ESL students use examples from their textbooks and in their language learning? (4) Drawing on the information gained by answering the first three questions, we sought understanding of the characteristics that might make one example better than another: That is, what is a "good example"?

The Process of Exemplification

If communication is analyzed as involving a process of output followed by feedback followed by response (Bormann 1980), exemplification might best be seen as part of the response to the feedback stage, providing clarification for the initial output. In this light, exemplification is a basic communication strategy used in the negotiation of meaning in many different contexts and includes both spoken and written language. In a language text, exemplification plays a key part in the interactive process between reader and text. The reading of textbook materials involves the same interactive processes widely accepted as basic to reading of other materials (Carrell and Esterhold 1983, Silberstein 1987). The

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feedback-response steps are anticipated by the author of the instructional materials who provides examples in anticipation of requests for clarification from the reader.

Sirridge (1980) makes a point of fundamental importance about the nature of exemplification as part of the communication process: all acts of communication (from poems to conversations) can be viewed both as being the thing itself (a particular poem or a particular conversation) and at the same time as being an example of the thing (a representative of a type, category, or genre). As language learners, we have had the experience of participating in a meaningful conversation and at the same time thinking "ah, that's how they do it" or "isn't that an interesting way to say it." One irony of language teaching seems to be that students might be finding examples in communication that the teacher thinks is focused on transmission of ideas and/or emotions. In sum, we need to be aware that the line between language used for exemplification and language used for other purposes is extremely thin--everything seems to be grist for the mill of exemplification.

Example Defined

Thus, exemplification is a communication process through which meaning is clarified by the use of linguistic forms called *examples*. While we initially thought of *example* as referring to the single word or sentence used to illustrate grammar rules, we have come to view it as a much broader term capable of use in many other areas of language teaching. To begin, we consulted *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1990), which includes three definitions that seem appropriate to the uses we have ourselves made of examples in our teaching and language learning:

> 3: a particular single item, fact, incident, or aspect that is representative of all of a group or type
> 4: a parallel or closely similar case esp. when serving as a precedent or model
> 5: an instance (as in a problem to be solved) serving to illustrate a rule or precept or to act as an exercise in the application of a rule (p. 431)

In that same entry, the synonyms for *example* are *instance* and *model*. Designers of instructional materials for use in business and personnel development such as Yelon and Massa (1987) clearly think of *example* as referring to larger discourse units including case studies. That is, *example* is best considered a very large category that includes subsets that are more often termed *model* or *sample*.

Not only grammar rules but many other aspects of a language and its use are taught through the use of examples. For example, in reading and writing classes, teachers provide examples of the ways that higher discourse units function, and in oral communication classes examples are provided of the ways in which conversations are begun, conducted, and concluded. And, as we have noted above, examples are often to be found in the content of many language materials. Ponder and Powell (1989), for instance, illustrates the double use that second language teachers make of reading materials, mining them for information and content and at the same time using them as models through which to practice reading skills (looking for the main idea, timed reading, and so forth). Additionally, from the description

of role plays in Dubin and Olshtain (1986), it is clear that this activity provides both for authentic communication and for carrying out communication in situations that are examples of the real. In sum, examples are used in all types of language teaching including but not limited to grammar lessons and materials.

While the terms are not used with complete consistency, four subcategories are frequently referred to in the literature on exemplification: *positive examples, negative examples*, *non-examples*, and *best examples* (Golden, Bentti, and Reigeluth 1988; Grow 1987; Haack 1972; McCallum, Apking, and Snyder 1987; Yelon and Massa 1987). The basic example itself is often termed the *positive example*. A *negative example* illustrates a mistake or the wrong way to do something: "*The students was confused." A *non-example*[1], on the other hand, illustrates what is not being talked about; it shows things that are not part of the topic under discussion: "Regular nouns form their plural by adding -s. *Child* is not a regular noun because its plural is *children*." A *best example* shows a typical member of a group: "Poe's "The Bells" shows the use of alliteration." A variation on the non-example involves what we will call the *comparative example*: two or more forms are illustrated in the same set of materials to demonstrate their differences. These comparative examples involve both positive examples of each type and negative examples to illustrate how they should not be used. A standard comparative set in ESL materials focuses on the simple past tense and the present perfect verb forms.

The Characteristics of Examples

Sirridge (1980) points out a fundamental characteristic of an example: its meaning can change from one context to another:

> A tailor's swatch exemplifies, for example, a color and texture. It has those properties, and context determines that it is to be taken as a sample of them--and not, for example, of its size properties. The 'backward reference' I allude to is thus a selection function, usually contextually determined, which determines which of the properties an object has it is to be taken as a sample of. A tailor's swatch held up in tailors' school as a example of a swatch would doubtless exemplify...its size properties and not its color and texture properties." (p. 392)

The significance of this for the language instructor and materials designer is enormous, for it would be dangerous to assume that an example can stand on its own without commentary to clarify its purpose. A single sentence, that is, could be viewed as illustrating any of several different points about English grammar, as Moon (1990) comments, one of the purposes of the instructional materials that accompany examples is to clarify the purpose of the example.

One of the few discussions of the characteristics of examples in second language

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[1]Some writers use the term negative example for this same meaning, for instance, Haack (1972).

learning and teaching is provided by Sweet in his *Practical Study of Languages* (1964), where he discusses principles to guide the selection and use of examples in the teaching and learning of grammar. While he seems to be thinking of single words or sentences that are given with a generalization about the language, much of what he has to say is appropriate for the other types of examples that we have discussed here:

1. Examples help tie the individual rule to the language as a whole.
2. An example "explains, illustrates, and justifies" the rule of grammar which it accompanies.
3. An example serves as a pattern to be used in analyzing other language samples by the student in subsequent encounters with the language.
4. Rules are not the primary purpose of study--using the language is: Therefore, examples are more important than rules. "The rules are mere stepping-stones to the understanding of the examples..." (pp. 130-131).

Another purpose for examples is pointed out by Moon (1990): examples give details of the functioning of the rule that are not included in the explanatory materials. This last characteristic underscores the interdependence of grammar rule and illustrative example: neither is complete without the other.

Exemplification in Published Texts

Working with these definitions of exemplification and example, we investigated the examples in three grammar texts (Azar 1989; Danielson, Porter, and Hayden 1990), one composition-grammar text (Smalley and Ruetten 1990), and one text that combines grammar with reading (Raimes 1990). Our purpose was to see how professional writers of ESL actually use examples in their published materials.

From that investigation, we developed three broad, overlapping categories to use in the analysis of examples as used in ESL materials (see the chart given below): (1) Sources (who writes or produces the examples); (2) Presentation (how examples are presented and formatted in printed materials); and (3) Uses (ways in which examples are used for different communication and instructional purposes).

In addition to these three categories, examples from the published textbooks can also be classified using the terminology discussed above: negative, non-, positive, and comparative examples. Most examples in all types of materials at all discourse levels are attempts to provide positive examples. However, negative examples occur regularly at the word-sentence level (**teached*), as well as at higher discourse levels (showing a paragraph without unity). In addition, sets of comparative examples are a basic strategy in ESL grammar materials used, for example, in charts which illustrate differences such as those between British and U.S. English or between verb forms.

Use of Textbook Examples by ESL Students

In addition to studying the literature on exemplification and the examples used in textbooks, we wanted to find out more about how ESL students actually use the examples in their textbooks. Five non-native English speaking students were interviewed: two students were from Taiwan and one each came from Peru, Thailand, and Turkey. All were either studying ESL at high intermediate/advanced levels or were university students who had recently completed their study of ESL. They provided the following insights into how students interact with examples and with textual materials.

As would be anticipated from research into learning and study styles (Harnett 1985), the students fell into two categories: one set preferred to focus on rules and to use examples to understand rules (holistic, deductive learners) while the other set preferred to focus on examples and to infer and confirm rules through the study of examples (analytical, inductive learners). However, one student who proclaimed himself to be a rule-oriented learner was observed to place most of his attention on the reading and understanding of examples when presented with a text that he had never studied before. Students, like other human beings, can value one type of behavior while they practice another.

Working with students learning principles of mechanical physics, Chi, Bassok, Lewis, Reiman, and Glaser (1987) analyzed the ability of good students to generalize from examples. ("Good" students were those who performed better in tests of their knowledge and were able to solve new problems that differed slightly from the worked-out problems that they had studied.) The "good" students differed from the "poor" students in the following ways: (1) they explained the examples to themselves; (2) they related the examples to the general principles given in the text materials; (3) they knew when they did not know or did not understand; (4) they looked at the examples to find particular information; (5) because they had particular goals in mind when reading an example, they tended to read less of it and to stop reading when they had the information that they needed to solve the problem; and (6) they seemed to use the examples as references in later study for tests.[2]

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[2] While our ESL students could be considered successful language learners because of the advanced levels that they had achieved, they were not compared to "poor" learners. Thus, additional study is needed to delineate differences in interaction with examples between more successful and less successful language learners.

The students in our project indicated that they use examples for the following purposes, which are similar to the uses made by the "good" students in Chi, Bassok, Lewis, Reiman, and Glaser (1987). (These ESL students used the term "rule" where the physics students talked about "principles.")

1. to check the accuracy of a rule
2. to practice a rule
3. to understand a rule
4. to help in memorizing a rule
5. to help in recalling a rule (especially in test situations)
6. as a source for language to be used in other settings

In other words, the students were moving back and forth between the example and the related generalization given in the text, using the examples as tools for understanding how English works and also as resources for language to use in other contexts.

All five students made strong recommendations about the formatting of examples to make them easier to use: (1) examples need to be in a typeface that is different from that of other materials in the text and (2) examples need to be set apart from the rest of the text so that they are easy to find. They were unanimous in advocating the presentation of grammatical material in charts and boxes that bring together related sets of examples along with limited amounts of commentary. Analysis of study and lecture notes prepared by one student showed that she had taken the time to reorganize some textbook material into chart format because she found it easier to learn in that format.

No matter what type of learning style they preferred, the students all gave serious attention to the examples given in their textbooks. In the study and lecture notes mentioned above, the student wrote a combination of generalizations and examples. (It was interesting to note that at points of difficulty such as the present perfect verb form she turned to writing in Thai rather than attempting to take notes in English.) It seems to us that the close attention that the students give to examples suggests that both teachers and materials writers need to examine carefully the factors that make examples most useful for students.

"Good" Examples

In the teaching of reading, writing, culture, and most fields of study, examples are used to clarify and illustrate concepts, processes, facts, and principles. Although grammar materials include these purposes, they can also provide examples of language itself with focus on form rather than meaning. An example can be as small as a single sound or as large as a movie; as long as it is being used to illustrate a category it is an example showing how that kind of thing works. But what makes one example better than another one? What guidelines exist to help the language teacher and materials writer?

In their advice to instructional development specialists, Yelon and Massa (1987) provide an overview of that should be useful for language teachers and materials writers: Good examples are accurate, clear, attractive, and transferrable. According to this definition, accuracy includes both having correct information and fitting the lesson being

taught, and clarity means that the example is concrete, brief, written in language that will be understood by the students, and presented so that its purposes and meaning are immediately evident. Attractiveness is defined as "interesting," a characteristic that is important for the following reasons:

> When examples are interesting, students are more likely to attend to them and are more likely to be motivated to remember them. To be interesting, examples should be related to the experiences, interests, or aspirations of the students, should have novel aspects, and should be credible and realistic. In addition, to produce attention, examples should be presented in a novel fashion. (p. 15)

Transferability involves having learning occur so that the students can transfer the information to other settings. To Yelon and Massa, transfer is unlikely to occur through the use of only one example. As a result, they recommend that important concepts be taught through an interrelated set of examples that differ in difficulty and focus on various parts of the concept. Similarly, Sweet, while discussing the importance of examples in language learning, provides an important guideline for the writer of examples that includes ideas similar to those of Yelon and Massa:

> Each grammar rule must have an example. If a rule has subdivision, then an example should be given for each part of the rule. (p. 132)

In addition, Sweet (1964:130-133) presents an entire list of characteristics of "good" examples along with some of the pitfalls of exemplification. According to Sweet, "good" examples possess the following qualities:

1. They illustrate or confirm the rule clearly. They are unambiguous.
2. They are understandable without more context.
3. They are as concrete as possible, the more concrete the better--
   especially in giving words and vocabulary for beginners.
4. They do not contain difficult or rare vocabulary or irregular forms that
   are not involved in the particular rule being illustrated.

Sweet also includes aspects of good examples that grow out of the unique problems of language learning and teaching:

1. Lists of prepositions, conjunctions, or other form-words are a "mere waste of space" in elementary practical grammar because they mean nothing to the beginning student.
2. The example must be in the language that is being taught.
3. He insists that examples that are made up by the teacher or materials writer are not as good as those collected from a variety of authentic writings.[3]

Other sources make general suggestions about language teaching materials generally that seem helpful in the process of preparation and selection of examples. Lykke (1987) advises "chunking" larger discourse into pieces that are more accessible to students. This advice seems especially important for students at lower proficiency levels. In the development of attractive and interesting examples, attention should also be paid to the literature in psychology that focuses on the characteristics that make some thing easier to learn than other things. The phrase used by Naus (1982:67) might be kept in mind while selecting and using examples: memory of information is improved when learners are presented with "highly relevant associated" examples. Examples that are highly relevant to students and that are in some ways associated with each other should be effective in helping students learn the material under consideration.

Examples are more than just linguistic forms. They also have to have some type of content, and that content should be appropriate to the audience for which they are prepared. Textbook publishers often ask reviewers to comment on whether or not materials would be interesting to students. However, defining what is "interesting" to another person is extremely difficult, especially if "interesting" is taken to mean "amusing." Indeed, because attempts at humor across cultures often fail (Nelson 1987), they should be approached with great care in all ESL materials and in EFL materials in particular. It might be more appropriate to follow the suggestion by Yelon and Massa (1987) mentioned above that examples be based on the backgrounds and educational, career, or job plans of the students. Certainly, the example writer should remember the importance of affective motivation in all learning and especially in language learning (Oller 1983).

Finally, the observation in Sirridge (1980) that an example can change meaning from context to context suggests a factor to consider about the contextualization of examples. It is obvious that an example should fit its context as accurately as possible. What is not quite so obvious is that an example cannot be used without a context because any one sample of language or communication through language could have multiple roles, illustrating different

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[3] However, Sweet seems to have had in mind examples to illustrate the written language that would be used by students to improve their reading ability. While his suggestion is still excellent advice for the preparation of samples of written English, a more appropriate guide for many other situations might be to strive for authentic language authentically used.

things in different contexts. Free-standing lists of words and sentences are inadequate as examples; there must be commentary or instructional contextualization of some type to point out the generalization, rule, or classification that is being illustrated.

In sum, "good" examples are accurate, clear, contextualized, useable in other contexts, presented in a format that makes them accessible to the student, and lead to learning. This advice on the preparation of examples has been summarized in Chart 2.

Conclusion

While good examples are a powerful tool for the language teacher and the language learner, the complexity of effective exemplification means that the creation of good examples is a skill that most teachers and materials writers will need to develop over time with much practice. Even the best of examples will go to waste if not embedded in an effective presentation by the teacher and in effective study by the student. Thus, more attention needs to be paid to the ways in which classroom teachers can use examples in the presentation and practice of ESL. Yelon and Massa (1987:14) state that examples are used by instructors "to motivate, to explain, to practice, and to test." Further thought needs to be given to how ESL teachers can best use examples for those and other purposes. We also need detailed information about ways in which skillful (and unskillful) language learners use examples as part of their battery of learning skills. Finally, we need research into the process of exemplification as a basic strategy both in communication and in second language acquisition.

Chart 1
Analysis of Examples in ESL Textbooks

I. Sources of examples
- A. Authentic (from published materials or recorded radio broadcasts)
- B. Textbook author prepared
- C. Student generated (writing samples used as models for other students)

II. Presentation of examples
- A. Graphic displays: time lines (to show verb meanings), charts, drawings (to show spatial meanings of prepositions)
- B. Type face: bold, italic, cursive handwriting (to show how to do an exercise)
- C. Verbal markers: *for example*, *e.g.*, *example* (as a heading), *observe*, *consider*, *Here are...*, *Study the following...*, *for instance*, *note*.

III. Uses of examples
- A. Word-sentence Level
  1. Illustrate forms and grammar rules
  2. Illustrate comparative examples
     a. British vs. American usage
     b. one grammar form vs. another
  3. Illustrate alternatives (*lie* "to tell a falsehood" vs. *lie* "to recline")
- B. Higher Discourse Levels
  1. Illustrate organization paragraphs and essays types (topic sentence, thesis statement, ordering of support, ties between paragraphs)
  2. Illustrate writing processes (taking notes, editing, narrowing a topic)
  3. Illustrate place/location of words/phrases in sentences/paragraphs (use of transition words and other cohesive devices)
  4. Provide chapter openers (readings, dialogues, etc., which are explained and used in the chapter)
  5. Illustrate writing functions (description, exposition, comparison and contrast, argumentation, etc.)
- C. Instructive (examples to illustrate how to do an exercise)
- D. To clarify content or commentary, using examples not to illustrate English but to communicate more accurately ("Certain people are important in our lives--our parents, family members, teachers, others."
- E. Supporting details for writing (some composition texts use term *example* for a type of support for generalizations, thesis statements, or topic sentences)

Chart 2 "Good" Examples

I. Accurate
- A. Linguistic Accuracy
  1. The example accurately reflects the language being studied
  2. The example uses authentic language
- B. Content Accuracy: the information in the examples is correct
- C. Cultural Accuracy
  1. Sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of the students so as to avoid offensive content
  2. Built on students' knowledge base

II. Clear
- A. Free of difficult or rare vocabulary or irregular forms that are not involved in the particular point being illustrated
- B. Relationship between the example and the rule or principle easily perceived

III. Interesting
- A. Based on the backgrounds and educational, career, or job plans of the students
- B. Credible and realistic
- C. Novel in content and presentation within appropriate cultural boundaries
- D. Humor used carefully with sensitivity to cultural differences

IV. Usable in Other Contexts: providing enough information for learning
- A. Interrelated sets of examples for complex content
- B. Each aspect of a rule or principle given an example

V. Contexualized
- A. Commentary or instructional contextualization provided to point out the concept being illustrated
- B. Free-standing lists of words and sentences to be avoided

VI. Formatted Attractively and Clearly
- A. Presented in a style that makes them easily distinguished from other instructional material
- B. Presented in boxes and charts where appropriate
- C. Divided into appropriate chunks of material

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